Note by LMB: This essay was written, if I'm remembering it correctly, at the request of my then-Chinese publisher and/or the SF convention being held that year China (in tandem with the Worldcon held in Japan), which I could not attend, but which asked for a greeting from me for their program. (Hence the mention of the Wikipedia article being in English.)

Space Opera, Miles, and Me

A short essay by Lois McMaster Bujold, June 2007

The term "space opera" has a varied history in discourse about American and British science fiction. The term was coined in the 1940's as a pejorative for a certain sort of sub-standard pulp fiction, in an attempt to distance the better SF writing from the worse. Later, in the '70s and '80s, the term was redeemed and given new meaning by a then-up-and-coming cadre of writers, accidentally including myself. Today, the term refers to a wide variety of character-driven adventure stories, usually set against variously-imagined galactic milieus, and includes some of the liveliest writing in the recent SF genre.

For more on the speckled history of the term, Wikipedia ("The Roulette Wheel of Knowledge" as some internet wag has dubbed it) has a good article (in English) here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Opera with further links to the Hartwell and Cramer article here: http://www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2003/0308/Space%20Opera%20Redefined/Review.htm This article, in fuller form, also appears as their introduction to their retrospective anthology, *The Space Opera Renaissance* (2006, Tor Books), which includes a reprint of my 1990 Miles novella "Weatherman."

At first, I was nervous about having the term applied to my writing, as "space opera" was still in transition from its old, bad to its new, good meaning. When initially struggling to make a living and a reputation, I was wary of my work being diminutized and dismissed. But then, I find all attempts to neatly box my work as part of some group I'm often barely aware of a bit puzzling. What I write, really, are Bujold books. They are full of stuff I like, sidestep whatever I don't care for, and have as their main job to please me as a reader. I figure I am data, and sit where I choose; critics are theory, and may chase me if they wish. If I have an artistic obligation, it is to be myself, at the top of my bent.

My journey to this position has been roundabout. As a girl in the 1960's, I read extensively in what is now called "Golden Age" SF, which was then usually thought of as a boy's genre. (I can't say as I noticed the gender bias at first, but then, I was an especially oblivious,

or perhaps focused, child.) Whatever was on the shelves of the public and school libraries, I sopped up: this included Clarke, Heinlein, and Asimov, of course, but also Poul Anderson, Eric Frank Russell, Randall Garrett, Anne McCaffrey, Zenna Henderson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and many others. In my teens, I had a subscription to *Analog Magazine*, then under the editorship of John W. Campbell, Jr., and read, among other things, Frank Herbert's classic *Dune* in its first serialization, and the stories of James H. Schmitz with their excellent female protagonists. A little later, I added Cordwainer Smith and Roger Zelazny to the mix. This was the SF genre upon which I imprinted.

The "New Wave" of the early '70s left me cold; I found it, much like the "alternative comics" I encountered in my college years, to seem dreary, ugly, and angry. In the next decade I drifted away from reading science fiction and instead read everything else, which later turned out to be very good for me as a writer. But as a result, the SF of the '70s and early '80s is rather a blank spot for me in terms of direct influence. Indirectly, however, the work of that period may well have helped widen the artistic boundaries of the SF genre enough for my idiosyncratic stories to step back into comfortably, when I returned to it.

I had tried to write in my teens, but had stopped for a variety of reasons. But in the early '80s, inspired by the writing of a friend and spurred by poverty, when I thought, "I want to write something folks will enjoy reading, and maybe *buy,*" it was to that earlier internalized model of story-telling that I turned. (I also felt a pull to mystery fiction, which I'd learned to enjoy, but the SF was stronger in my imagination.)

In addition to a decade of reading everything *but* SF, by this time I had the experience of growing into adult life, into the roles of wife and mother, and a number of years working in patient care at a major university hospital. Besides giving me an enormous amount of direct human observation, medicine was and is one of the more science-fictional things ordinary people ever encounter. For a working model of everything that can go wrong when modern technological change meets mankind, it can hardly be equaled. Finally, I had acquired things to say that did not come out of other people's books.

Still, I wrote my first three novels very much in isolation from the genre influences of the day. (Stuck in a rural town with two small children and no money, I was pretty much isolated from everything, really.) But what I pulled out of the accumulated contents of my head, somehow, was a universe.

Having wandered into my first series piecemeal, I never gave it a proper series name; it's called variously "Miles's Universe (or Saga, or Adventures "the Vorkosiverse," or "the Nexus." But, after a false start with a proto-novella (a mystery set on a future Earth), it all

began one day in late 1982 when I sat down with a spiral notebook and pencil and began the first scene of what later became *Shards of Honor.* I had never written a novel before, and it was very much a learn-by-doing experience.

Over the course of my first three novels (still unsold, at that point) both Miles's universe and my writing skills began to develop and grow. I do indeed use a somewhat generic "space opera" galactic background, with an entirely bogus means for getting characters around the galaxy via "wormhole jumps." Since this violates both physics and economics, no one, least of all me, can consider my space-faring story-background to be serious futurism. It is instead a literary or psychological landscape, of high seriousness in quite another mode, a matter of metaphor. However, the actual sciences in the foreground of my science fiction are usually biology, medicine, genetics, and genetic engineering, and the focus is the stresses on people of technological change driving social change. Which is science fiction proper by any definition. The end result is a reasonably subtle blend of fantasy and futurism.

But Miles, as he developed, is in some ways very much a space opera counter-hero, or critique of the original genre, and indeed, of the whole male-adventure genre including James Bond and the like. (The term "anti-hero" has another meaning, which does not apply to Miles.) Pick a heroic attribute, and Miles will be the opposite–tall, lantern-jawed, strong, handsome? Nope. Try short, fragile-boned, and odd-looking. A grandly tragic orphan, a loner, free of the cloying obligations of family? Nope--Miles has a plethora of living relatives to show up and annoy him. Goes through women like tissue paper? Nope–Miles's old girlfriends tend to hang around, still alive, stubbornly being themselves. Unselfconsciously heroic? Not Miles. He's a post-modern hero, and can't help being conscious of just about everything.

But he also has brains, charisma, hyperactivity, and a fear-fueled drive to succeed strong enough to power starships. As a writer, I have found him to be a wonderful character to work with. Other more sensible and sane protagonists have to be manipulated like crazy to get them out of their ruts and started on their plots. Miles merely has to be pointed in the general direction of the problem. Snap off his leash, and he's off and running, with his author laboring to keep up.

Like real people, Miles came first from his parents, the protagonists of *Shards of Honor* (and later, *Barrayar*). I knew from very early on that Aral and Cordelia would have a physically handicapped son in their military-mad culture. Miles was named in honor of the character of Miles Hendron, from Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*; (I had not yet learned that "miles" meant "soldier" in Latin, but I'll bet Twain knew.) Miles's physical handicaps

were partly modeled on those of a hospital pharmacist with whom I'd once worked, including the height, leg braces, and chin tic. I took some of Miles's subtler qualities as an inspirational leader from my readings about T.E. Lawrence, British soldier and writer from World War I who is better known as "Lawrence of Arabia." On a still deeper level of characterization, Miles's "great man's son syndrome," his daunted drive to equal his father's achievements, owes something to my relationship to my own father. But once in motion, Miles quickly became himself.

By the time I'd finished *Shards of Honor* I'd also developed the much more unexpected character of Konstantine Bothari. Bothari and Miles were a magnetic pairing. The very first image I had for the book that eventually became *The Warrior's Apprentice* was of the death of Bothari, whom I visualized defending Miles from some yet-to-be-conceived enemy on a shuttleport tarmac, far from home. The title *The Warrior's Apprentice* is, by the way, a pun on the old folk tale of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," wherein a young man, attempting tasks beyond his scope, creates chaos for his master. While my book had in some ways this same comic plot structure, that of the little white lie that gets out of hand, it always had this tragedy hidden in its heart. And for all the external challenges Miles faced, it was his internal flaws–pride, imprudence, and despair–that caused him the most grief, and it was his struggle with them that drove his tale.

Miles proved too powerful a character to be contained in one book, and promptly began to spawn sequels, but again, they weren't quite the sequels anyone raised on earlier space opera would expect. For one thing, I kept coloring outside the lines of genre boundaries. Instead of all being in one genre, the Vorkosigan books contain several genres–military SF, coming-of-age, mystery, romance both gothic and comic, a touch (but seldom the tone) of horror. The books are neither simple nor uniform, and I take some pride in never having written the same book twice. As the series grew, I also discovered the power of series books to comment on or critique each other, to re-examine questions previously dealt with, to explore the unintended long-range consequences of my characters' prior acts; to explore a man's life through time.

My father, a professor of engineering, used to say he didn't bother changing his tests from year to year, because while the questions were the same, the answers changed. I think this is true of a person's maturing life, as well. As Miles (and I) grew older, he too discovered, often the hard way, that the answers change.

The mind of a man is not the sort of broad galactic scope traditional space opera had dealt with, but I found it universe enough for my tale. Which is yet another way my "space opera" ran counter to the expected norms of the genre, and so helped to change them. That my novels of character were packaged and sold as military SF by Baen

Books was probably a lucky break for me, as it allowed me to sneak in under the radar of genre expectations. By the time folks began to notice that nothing about my work was quite what it appeared, I had begun to acquire the readership who have sustained my art ever since.